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Tackling Informational Text Pages 52-56

Preparing English Language Learners for Complex Reading

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Short pro and con texts on hot topics give English language learners entry into the features of argumentative texts in English.

The Common Core standards connected to reading informational text elevate expectations for both English language arts teachers and their students. Few would argue with the standards' laudable goal of ensuring that every student leaves high school prepared to meet the demands of college and careers. But complying with these standards is daunting—especially for schools serving English language learners (ELLs).

Colegio Inglés is a private, bilingual preK–9 school outside Monterrey, Mexico. The assumption that guides our teachers, administrators, students, and parents is that all our graduates will finish high school and enroll in a university. Moreover, we expect our graduates to function equally effectively in Spanish-speaking and English-speaking environments. Our faculty, therefore, bear the responsibility of designing instruction that prepares students for the varied, complex reading they'll do in high school, college, and careers.

Wanted: Engaging Informational Texts

Our middle school English language arts teachers, in particular, face the challenge of finding resources and strategies that benefit ELLs. Two of us, Paul and Andria, are 9th grade English language arts teachers at Colegio Inglés. We need texts that respect adolescent learners' level of intellectual development and engage them, yet are accessible to learners who are still acquiring both facility with English and an understanding of how authors who are native English speakers—and who write for the same—express and organize ideas.

By 9th grade, our Spanish-speaking students have read much English literature. Some speak with near-native proficiency. Their exposure to and comprehension of informative texts in English, however, is limited. Saborío Pérez (2007) found that without explicit instruction, Spanish-speaking ELLs exhibit little awareness of the rhetorical characteristics of informative text in English, particularly argumentative discourse.

Both Spanish and English informative texts use main ideas to introduce topics, but there are significant rhetorical differences. Compared to Spanish texts, English texts are more likely to vary sentence length, restrict paragraph content to one narrow main idea, and provide concrete support for main ideas. English argumentative texts tend to cite both pros and cons; Spanish texts often build justification for only one side of an issue (Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008).

Second language learners' familiarity with the rhetorical schemata of their first language can hinder their ability to process and retain information presented in their second language (Wennerstrom, 2004). Involving ELLs in tasks that ask them to analyze discourse and examine the rhetorical schema of English writing should help overcome this obstacle. That's what we set out to do in a unit on using short pro and con texts on compelling issues.

Selecting the Skills and Texts

We essentially scaffolded our middle schoolers' process of analyzing argumentative discourse by developing tasks that focused on several skills: (1) identifying support for main ideas; (2) recognizing bias; (3) distinguishing arguments and corresponding counterarguments; (4) evaluating relative strength of arguments; and (5) drawing conclusions based on evidence. Requiring students to justify their responses for each task ensured that they noticed the salient rhetorical features of English argumentative text—and understood the intent of these features.

Lengthy texts can intimidate ELLs. Seeking scaled-down versions that would nevertheless exhibit appropriate degrees of complexity, we found the free resources at [Pros and Cons of Controversial Issues](#), a nonpartisan website that presents one-paragraph excerpts from articles supporting the pro and con sides of provocative topics.¹

These excerpts typically fall within late high school readability levels, so they were challenging enough. We believed our ELLs could acquire the comprehension strategies that proficient readers of English argumentative texts use, through repeated practice with diverse readings from this site. Considering our students' experience and interests, we chose these topics:

- Are social networking sites good for society?
- Should tablets replace textbooks in K–12 schools?
- Is drinking milk healthy for humans?

For each topic, we developed a set of five tasks, each targeting one of the selected reading skills. As they worked, students highlighted language in the texts that helped them complete the task. They then discussed questions that stimulated metacognitive thinking, such as these:

- What vocabulary or features of the text helped you with the task?
- What did you pay particular attention to?
- Which texts were the most difficult to understand? Why?
- Which were easiest to understand? Why?
- Can a task like this help you improve your reading skills? Why or why not?

With teachers' guidance, students developed and refined strategies that connected to each reading skill. In terms of scaffolding the tasks for our learners, we considered the first task to be the main scaffold for the entire series of tasks. By 9th grade, our students have had ample instruction on the structure of paragraphs having a topic sentence and supporting details. The first task gave students an opportunity to apply this background knowledge, but with in-depth analysis.

To assess the effectiveness of the tasks, we analyzed students' interactions with the readings and recorded their comments. Let's look at how each task helped our English learners become adept with the rhetoric of persuasive informational texts in their second language. (You can view all the tasks at www.cingles.edu.mx.)

Tackling the Tasks

1. Identifying Support for Main Ideas

Texts available through ProCon.org typically begin with a topic sentence supported by details, including facts, statistics, examples, expert opinions, and anecdotes. For students' first task, we separated topic sentences from their details and created a worksheet showing a column of 10 sets of supporting details and a column of 10 topic sentences. Students analyzed each set of details and matched it to its corresponding topic sentence. For instance, a set of details containing facts like "51 percent of people ages 25–34 accessed social media while at work" and similar statements would be matched with the topic sentence, "Social networking sites harm employees' productivity."

This task was an easy confidence builder. In class sharing, students eagerly offered phrases they'd highlighted, adding any their classmates had overlooked. Normally reticent students raised their hands to share responses. As a strategy, students looked for keywords in topic sentences that matched keywords in a list of details. Students came to recognize that the details substantiated the topic sentences; Teresa even noted that without supporting details, topic sentences are only opinions.

Samuel, an avid fiction reader, knew that main ideas were supported by details. However, he hadn't given much

thought to the types of details authors choose. Reading closely, he noticed that one main idea was sometimes "backed up" by several types of details, like facts, statistics, and quotes. Speculating on why a writer might combine details, Samuel conjectured that abundant support would be better than too little. He considered the possibility that different types of details would appeal to different readers. Samuel also noticed that excerpts often cited the sources of details with expressions like *according to*, which he called "backup for the backup."

2. Detecting Bias

For the second task, we selected paragraphs supporting each side of a topic, organized them randomly, and asked students to determine whether each paragraph argued the pro or the con side of the issue. Students generally agreed on which texts were pro or con. They reported looking for language that they considered "positive" (such as *create*, *allow*, or *collaborate*) or "negative" (*harm* or *suicide*).

Although students mostly had sufficient personal background on the topics we selected, they acknowledged that lack of personal experience with some topics hindered comprehension. A text about the benefits of social networking for businesswomen, for instance, proved challenging for boys.

Even on the first topic, Marcela classified texts as pro or con with little difficulty. By the third topic, she was assigning connotations to words and actively seeking the bias in every text, even while doing the other four tasks. She commented that recognizing a text's position more efficiently would help her manage the substantial reading loads of high school and university. She recognized the value of exploring the pros and cons of a topic, which she said would give readers a wider understanding and encourage them to become more empathetic and tolerant of others' views. Marcela exclaimed, "This is so interesting. It's better than schoolwork!"

3. Distinguishing Arguments and Counterarguments

Students' third task was to match arguments with corresponding counterarguments. We intentionally included multiple counterargument excerpts for each argument to increase the complexity of this work. For example, for the argument claiming that social networking sites facilitate cyberbullying, we presented at least two possible counterarguments, one beginning "Social networking sites allow people to improve their relationships and make new friends" and giving related statistics, and one stating that "Social networking sites help people who are socially isolated or shy connect with others."

Although students found this task considerably more difficult than previous ones, they acknowledged that the first two activities had prepared them for the challenge. Students looked for texts that discussed the same topic but presented opposing perspectives, including supplying supporting details that conflicted with one another. Our teens disagreed more during this discussion than during previous tasks. They enjoyed recounting their struggles to find the contrasting paragraphs, and they vigorously justified their matches.

Sebastián, who writes fiction, found this task rewarding. He described sifting through "tiny details" to distinguish the precise intention of each argument and identify its possible counterarguments. As he completed this task for the first topic, Sebastián had a revelation that every argument can be opposed with a counterargument, which caused him to adopt an interesting critical stance. Working on subsequent topics, he generated counterarguments for each text he read, perceiving himself as an "enemy of arguments." He described his reading objective as combating arguments with counterarguments, a "habit forming" behavior.

4. Evaluating the Relative Strength of Arguments

We presented students with texts that they had previously identified as pro or con relative to the topic at hand. In groups, students ranked the pro and con arguments from strongest to weakest.

The challenge here was ambiguity. By the time they arrived at this task, students had read and understood all the texts. However, with no clear correct or incorrect responses, they had to rely solely on their judgment to prioritize issues on which they would judge an argument's strength. On their own, students noticed that some excerpts focused on health, economics, education, or other key social issues.

Gradually, students began identifying arguments as stronger or weaker and distinguishing between issues of greater or lesser concern. This task produced fervent discussions as to whether health, economics, or education should be ranked as the top issue against which to evaluate arguments. Students defended their perspectives by citing evidence from the texts, a Common Core standard for reading informational text. By the third topic, students showed greater consensus among their rankings. One student thought she and her classmates had "absorbed" common criteria.

Isabella found this task difficult, especially because her first rankings differed considerably from those of her classmates. She struggled to determine her own priorities and scale of importance. Initially, all the arguments seemed valid and significant to her, so Isabella decided that arguments supported by statistics were the most convincing. She began to question her strategy, however, when she heard her classmates' justifications for their rankings. Unlike Isabella, some had paid particular attention to the social significance of each argument.

Isabella eventually adopted social significance as her first criterion, followed by type of support. By the final topic, she also found herself automatically evaluating and comparing the strength of pro and con arguments even before arriving at this task.

5. Drawing Conclusions

The culminating task required students to examine all the evidence for the pro and con sides of each issue and decide which side presented the most convincing arguments. Students worked individually and then shared and justified their decisions with their group. Some students found it disconcerting to align themselves with only one side of an argument when evidence existed for both sides. Most, however, combined evidence from the readings with their personal experience and viewpoints to support one side of the issues they'd studied.

Like many of her classmates, Regina revealed a maturing understanding of critical-reading processes as she completed this task for each topic. With each repetition of this task, she became increasingly aware that the intensive reading she'd done facilitated her ability to arrive at her own conclusion. Evidence, she said, "gives the reader security and a sense of reality; what you're reading is not false or just based on someone's opinion." Regina spoke of "joining" evidence from the texts to arrive at her conclusion, a probable reference to the process of synthesis. Regina also recognized that evidence can change behavior: She laughingly admitted that she's now drinking less milk after reading about its potentially harmful effects on humans.

Follow Up

After students completed all five tasks for all topics, we surveyed them to assess how much each task improved their reading skills. Eighty-five percent agreed that the repeated task practice with brief excerpts would help them when reading longer texts. Students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn from their initial struggles and refine their reading skills as they tackled the same tasks with different topics. It seemed they became increasingly strategic and proficient in applying the target skills with each repetition. Students mentioned being able to identify main ideas more quickly, to recognize bias more efficiently, and to compare the validity of arguments more effectively. One student felt that working with shorter texts helped; she viewed each excerpt as a collection of related ideas, rather than "a lot of words."

Many students believed that the tasks would improve their writing skills because they'd become more aware of the importance of compiling evidence to support arguments and organizing arguments with consideration for the reader.

To transition to longer texts, we assigned students to read two full-length articles (at the high school level) that argued for and against raising the minimum driving age. As with the shorter readings, we asked students to detect bias in each article, identify the arguments, evaluate the strength of the evidence, and arrive at their own conclusions. Students performed very well on this assignment.

Creating and implementing tasks that support our ELLs' ability to recognize features of complex, argumentative texts in English and to tackle them has been rewarding and encouraging. We're continuing to design instruction that challenges all our students to meet the demands of the Common Core English language arts standards, and are confident they can do so.² To expect anything less would underestimate our students and ourselves.

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Endnotes

¹ ProCon.org is a nonprofit organization that provides resources to encourage critical thinking. ProCon researches controversial issues and presents arguments on them in a pro-con format on its website, available for teachers to use for educational purposes.

² Although the majority of our students are Mexican nationals who are learning English as their second language, we try to align our English language arts curriculum to the U.S. Common Core State Standards. Students also take Spanish language arts classes based on the national curriculum standards of Mexico.

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